Mitchell Cowen Verter
Levinas: Perverter
June 11, 2008

http://www.waste.org/~roadrunner/writing/Levinas/LevinasPerverter_20_1.htm

theanarchistlibrary.org

Levinas: Perverter

Mitchell Cowen Verter

June 11, 2008

Contents

given surface-direction" (657). The analogy between Levinas and Riemann could be perhaps extended as well to Einstein's ideas on how gravitational mass-energy curves space-time.

Although we are mindful of Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's warning to be cautious when employing technical language, I would assert that there has always been a fruitful interchange between the natural sciences and philosophy, even when they don't entirely understand each other.

Levinas rarely makes ambitious claims about mathematics, but he must have been familiar with basic concepts, especially because at least two of his earliest philosophical influences, Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl, were former mathematicians who wrote about mathematical concepts. It seems likely that Levinas would have learned about Bernhard Riemann through these authors. Deleuze remarks, "Husserl too gained inspiration from Riemann's theory of multiplicities, although in a different way from Bergson" (118n4). Perhaps we could even trace a path from Riemann manifolds, through Bergson and Husserl, to correlate the anarchic "multiplicities" discussed by *both* Deleuze *and* Levinas.

Although this "woman" and the home she makes can most evidently be conceived as a wife for the mature male self, it also implicates the phallus and the cavity that receives it, the mother and the womb, as well as the counterpart of the Master: "the enjoyment that becomes *mistress* of the world interiorizing it with respect to its dwelling" (*TI* 141, my italics).

Given the ambiguity inherent in the ethical situation, how can we philosophers then avoid Cohen's relentless urging to "take sides" and to treat thinking like a fight between Athens and Jerusalem, a battle on the Western Front?

phers be what Derrida in his essay on Levinas refers to as "a community of the question about the possibility of the question? This is very little — almost nothing — but within it, today, is sheltered and encapsulated an unbreachable responsibility" (*WD* 80). Can't we hear Levinas's *direct response to Derrida*'s call to responsibility in the conclusion of the introduction to *Otherwise than Being*: "the naivete of the philosopher calls, beyond the reflection for oneself, for the critique exercised by *another* philosopher Philosophy thus arouses a drama between philosophers and an intersubjective movement"?(*OTB* 20)?

In its new publication of *Otherwise than Being*, Duquesne Press has allowed Richard A. Cohen to insert his Foreword before Alphonso Lingis's thoughtful, analytic, and often-translated Translator's Introduction (for example, in *Cahier de L'Herne: Emmanuel Levinas,* edited by Catherine Chalier and Miguel Abensour.) In this essay, Cohen recruits Levinas as a warrior in "a new and future *gigantomachia* that has arisen in the twentieth century" (*OTB* xiii). It is unbelievable that such a veritable call for the fratricide of Cain could enter a book written by Levinas. Right here and right now, in the very Saying of this very text, I am please requesting that Richard A. Cohen recant this violence, and that he and Duquesne Press agree to remove this Foreword from all future reprints

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely Yours,
Mitchell Verter

Even more ambitiously, perhaps we could account for the multiplicity of tangent vectors by attempting parallel transport between Levinas's notion of curvature and the definition of curvature proposed by mathematician Bernhard Riemann, "the measure of the deviation of the manifold from flatness at the given point in the

(for Alphonso Lingis)

ABSTRACT

Since the inauguration of modern French feminism in Simone DeBeauvoir's *The Second Sex,* Emmanuel Levinas has been criticized for the way his thought employs gendered, familial tropes. In response, this paper argues that, although this does constitute a very real and urgent *problematic* in Levinas's thought, it only becomes a *problem* when his writing is read in a hermeneutically "straight" manner. Beneath the apparent hetero-normative veneer of Levinas's prose lurk traces of queerness. By closely tracing the motifs that Levinas correlates with gender, this paper will illustrate how, at each instant in the ethical relationship, the Self is always transforming between masculine- and feminine-gendered performances for a feminine- or masculine-gendered Other. Rather than embodying a conservative and essentialist view of sexuality, Levinas articulates an existential performative perversity.

Levinas, Perverter

"Now I say that Man, and in general every rational being, *exists* as an End in Himself."

– Immanuel Kant (95)

Throughout his work, most evidently in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas employs motifs of kinship to describe my connection with alterity. When he describes the world as being "familiar to us" (*TI* 33), Levinas implies that experience is constituted *as* family members. Through each perspective of the ethical "relationship" (*TI* 39) opened at each instant of the ethical genealogy, the Other figures as a different *relative*: the father of futural fecundity (*TI* 274–277),

the wife of the economic home (*TI* 154–156), the brother of political fraternity (*TI* 278–280), the sister soul of incestuous Eros (*TI* 254), and so on. The prevalence of these gendered family tropes has led many commentators to criticize Levinas for having a sexist and heteronormative bias. Over half a century ago in the foundational work of modern French feminism, *The Second Sex,* Simone de Beauvoir accused Levinas's figuration of woman as Other to be "an assertion of masculine privilege" (xvi n3). More recently, this protest has been expressed more angrily, with a recent article claiming that Levinas's work articulates a "demonization of femininity and erasure of maternity" (Walsh 97).

For anyone who admires the work of Levinas, such anger is alarming. Rather than reacting *against* this feminist standpoint, however, it is precisely our responsibility as Levinas scholars to be awakened by this alarm and to respond sincerely to this anger. As Andrea Juno and V. Vale explain, "[Women's] anger can spark and re-invigorate; it can bring hope and energy back into our lives and mobilize politically against the status quo" (5). Only by rendering Levinas vulnerable, by exposing him to feminist critique, can we begin to answer for the problems in his thought and perhaps even to use these problems to develop new insights into gender and sexuality.

On the one hand, the feminist objection to Levinas's language seems to be exactly correct. Without a doubt, Levinas uses gendered motifs throughout his philosophy, deploying familial structures inherited from *both* the Judaic *and* the Greek legacies of patriarchy.[1] At all moments of our reading, this should indeed trouble us. We should always refrain from masquerading his

[1] Lisa Walsh asserts that "[Levinas's] assumptions as to the nature of the maternal and paternal functions draw on the same Greek sensibilities [as psychoanalysis.]" (80). Although the Greek mythical and philosophical traditions have influenced Levinas, another distinct but often interrelated tradition of patriarchy, the Judaic, seems equally if not more important for him — and arguably for psychoanalysis as well.

Derrida of, "hiding behind the masks and ruses of language, language reduced to rhetoric, escaping responsibilities and obligations by saying'adieu' to Levinas" (*EEP* 160). It is almost impossible to read a line so dense with cruelty. One trembles with anger and sadness at the demeaning of this friend's grievance for the loss of his friend, of this philosopher's mourning for another member of the philosophical fraternity, of this mother's hospitality that welcomes her child into death, of this sister's obedience to the divine law of *Θέμις* that urges her towards the anarchic responsibility of burying her beloved brother.

Claiming that Levinas "sides with" Jerusalem over Athens, Cohen turns Levinas into a murderer, claiming that "Levinas cannot live with either Hegel or Derrida" (*EHG* 319). I often wonder whether Cohen has read the same Levinas that I have. How could an interpreter of Levinas bring such violence into the field of Levinas studies? How could a reader of Levinas so willfully ignore his prefatory quest to separate thought from war (*TI* 21)? Yet Cohen repeatedly describes philosophical conversation in the most combative terms, employing the language of fighting, applying Carl Schmitt's logic of friend and enemy, and transforming intellectuals into armies.

Is philosophy the same as pugilism and thinking the same as war? Are we who pretend to be thinkers mere bullies who use ideas as if they were gloves to beat down opponents? Wouldn't these blows knock us out, numb us into dogmatism, the slumber from which Kant awoke us over two centuries ago?

Do philosophers *fight* or, as Levinas wonders, is "reason constituted rather in a situation where'one chats,' where the resistance of a being as a being is not broken, but pacified?" (*IOF* 126–27) Hasn't philosophy been the opportunity to consider what calls for thinking and to whom the intellectual is responsible? Can we philoso-

Verter, Mitchell. "Viewing Power in Heidegger and Levinas." Retrieved August 23, 2007 from <http://www.waste.org/~roadrunner/writing/thesis.htm.>

Wahl, Jean. *A short history of existentialism,* trans. F. Williams and S. Maron. New York: Philosophical Library, 1949.

Walsh, Lisa. "Between Maternity and Paternity: Figuring Ethical Subjectivity," *differences* 12.1 (2001), 79–111.

AN OPEN LETTER TO RICHARD A. COHEN AND DUQUENSE PRESS:

In the final chapter of *Elevations*, "Derrida's (Mal)Reading of Levinas," Richard A. Cohen transforms Levinas's eschatology of peace into a declaration of combat. In Cohen's words, he "passes over the details of Derrida's 99 page deconstruction" (*EHG* 305) and instead picks a fight between Derrida and Levinas: "my intent is to explain why and with what good reason Derrida's essay has been construed as an attack on Levinas" (*EHG* 314 n10). Cohen figures the "Levinas-Derrida conflict" (*EHG* 306) as the very site of an original *polemos* that "on this ultimate question, Athens or Jerusalem the true or the good one must take sides" (*EHG* 315). Cohen argues that Derrida takes Heidegger's side. Failing to recognize how Derrida rearticulates the problematic of philosophy and its Other in order to return to Levinas's own problematic of Reason and its Other (*TI,* 82–101), Cohen claims that "Derrida's ultimate response to Levinas is ostracism, exile, exclusion, excision" from the philosophical community.

Cohen regularly attacks Derrida for being Heidegger's "most faithful and clever" (*EEP* 4) disciple dangerously evoking the anti-Semitic disparagement of the Jew for being merely "clever" (for example, Hitler 412 ff.) Worse yet, because Cohen believes Derrida to be a "sycophantic follower" (*EEP* 121) of Heidegger, he refuses to accept the mutual respect between Derrida and Levinas. Alluding to *Adieu*, Derrida's funeral oration to Levinas, Cohen accuses

gendered language by replacing masculine pronouns with feminine ones, neutral ones, or even the hermaphroditic "he or she"; perhaps we should cease altogether to use "it" in our translations. We must keep in mind that Levinas articulates *Humanisme de l'autre Homme,* "Humanism of the Other *Man*," and not, as a recent translation would have it, "Humanism of the Other." On the other hand, only to claim that Levinas "privileges" the masculine over the feminine overlooks the more essential question: what does "privileging" mean and should we necessarily privilege the privileged over the secondary?

Derrida astutely poses this methodological problem, "We will attempt to ask several questions. If they succeed in approaching the heart of this explication, they will be nothing less than objections but rather the questions put to *us* by Levinas" (*WD* 84). Perhaps the words that have caused so much controversy in Levinas's work are the very terms that he himself opens up for discussion? Perhaps Levinas's usage of filial tropes is not merely one of the "problems" in his view of politics (Critchley 174) but rather a *problematic* which must be deepened?

More than any other thinker in the history of Western philosophy, Levinas stands accused in the very body of his texts, texts that "call for the critique exercised by *another* philosopher" (*OTB* 20), texts radically open to critical readings, texts that constantly require justification. Exactly because he employs binary gendered concepts, we can use Levinas's texts to protest for justice not just in his work but in philosophy and in Western culture itself. Levinas has inherited sexist language and patriarchal logic from a long tradition of canonical Western thought–most of which has been written by white males[2]–that has typically figured subjectivity as virility and citizenship as fraternity. Whereas many sensible, egalitar-

[2] The very writer of this very paper is also identified as a white male. To what extent should any of these words of identification–subject copula adjective noun–be placed under erasure?

ian thinkers try to masquerade this legacy by using gender-neutral language, Levinas deliberately foregrounds the problematic of gender. Therefore, perhaps a careful and critical reading of his texts can begin to think through the history of thought as masculine and to respond to the anger of our sisters.

Elevations and Subversion

As distressing as it can be when anger is directed against a thinker one admires, it seems even worse when someone defends his thought with hostility and even employs it as a weapon of attack. As writers who have taken responsibility for the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, we have already committed to responding to the protest that his writings have engendered. For this reason, it seems inappropriate for Richard A. Cohen to dismiss the feminist analysis of Tina Chanter's "Antigone's Dilemma" with so much brutality and condescension in his first book *Elevations*, characterizing her thoughtful and temperate article as "a hatchet job. Levinas is once more made to play the tired role of the male fall guy So why even bother with Levinas, one wonders, that sophisticated intellectual male chauvinist pig?" (*EHG* 196) It is hard for me to understand how a scholar of Levinas–a philosopher of politeness if nothing else–could be so rude and patronizing to one of our sisters. However, Cohen dismisses Levinas's critical questioners–feminist and otherwise–as "attackers" (*EHG* 195) none of whom is given the individuated respect for separated Otherness, but who are instead defined collectively as enemies who "demonstrate loyalty to a party or school." (*EHG* 196)

Elevations opens upon an ominous note. Cohen recounts, "I remember distinctly to this day the impression Levinas made on me. 'This is *true*', I thought, in contrast to all the philosophers and philosophies which are *fascinating* or *provocative*" (*EHG* xi). Although anyone who has read Levinas can certainly appreciate

Husserl, Edmund. *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, trans. Anthony Steinbock. Boston: Kluwer, 2001.

—. *Ideas, first book*, trans. Fred Kersten. Boston: Kluwer, 1983.

Juno, Andrea and V. Vale. *Angry Women.* San Francisco: RE/SEARCH, 1991.

Kant, Immanuel. *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals,* ed. H. J. Paton. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult freedom* [*DF*], trans. SeÃ¡n Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.

—. *Existence and Existents* [*EE*], trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijoff, 1978.

—. "Is Ontology Fundamental" [*IOF*], trans. Peter Atterton. *Philosophy Today* 33:2 (Summer 1989), 121–29.

—. *Otherwise than being* [*OTB*], trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998.

—. *Time and the Other* [*TO*], trans Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1987.

—. *Totalite et Infini* [*TeI*]. Paris: Librairie General Francaise — Livre de Poche, 1990.

—. *Totality and Infinity* [*TI*], trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo,* trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1968.

Riemann, Bernhard. "On the hypotheses which lie at the foundation of geometry." In *From Kant to Hilbert,* ed. William Ewald. Vol 2, 652–661. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.

Scholem, Gershom. *Major trends in Jewish mysticism.* New York: Schocken, 1954.

Sokal, Alan and Jean Bricmont. *Fashionable Nonsense:* New York: Picador, 1999.

Steinbock, Anthony. *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1995.

— Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy *[*EEP*]. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.*

— "Introduction." In Humanism of the Other*, ed. R. A. Cohen. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003.*

Critchley, Simon. "Five problems in Levinas's view of politics and a sketch of a solution to them." *Political Theory* 32 (2004), 172–185.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Bergsonism,* trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam. New York: Zone, 1998.

Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas,* trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

—. *Margins of philosophy* [*MP*], trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982.

—. Politics of Friendship *[*PF*]*, trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 1997.

—. *Writing and difference* [*WD*], trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978.

Dundes, Alan. ***The Shabbat elevator.*** **Lanham, MD: Rowhan & Littlefield, 2002.**

Ellis, Havelock and John Symonds. *Sexual Inversion.* New York: Arno Press, 1975.

Foucault, Michel. *The use of pleasure,* trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

Freud, Sigmund. *Three essays on sexuality*, trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1970.

Handelman, Susan. *The Slayers of Moses.* Albany: SUNY, 1982.

Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings* [*BW*]*,* ed. D.F. Krell. San Francisco: Harper, 1977.

—. Being and Time [*BT*]*,* trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. San Francisco: Harper, 1962.

Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf,* ed. J. Chamberlain et al. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939.

Cohen's "naive" (*EHG* xi) sense of wonder, Cohen makes the dangerous move of proclaiming Levinas's thought to be "*true*," momentarily overlooking Levinas's crucial "elevation" of the Good over the True. Practically canonizing Levinas as a saint or prophet, such an orthodox interpretation verges on dogmatism. We can already hear in Cohen's contempt for thinkers who are merely "*fascinating* or *provocative*" an effort to reduce the ethical height of Levinas's phenomenological ethics to a belligerent morality of *ressentiment.*

Although Cohen is an astute phenomenologist, he makes the mistake of placing the normative over the phenomenological without fully appreciating how Levinas's phenomenology is already ethics. Cohen states that "the central claim in Levinas is that the face of the other is manifested in and manifests a moral height" (*EHG* 183). Nevertheless, he reduces Levinas's thought to a set of moral platitudes: "It is quite simple: it is better to be good than anything else. It is better to help others than to help ourselves" (*EEP* 11). Contrary to Cohen's interpretation, however, Levinas does not issue prescriptive commands, but instead demonstrates how the prescriptive is already embedded in the existential. Levinas's project is closely akin to Husserl's quest to determine the eidetic essences that structure experience (*Ideas* 7–8), and even more similar to Heidegger's demonstration that our "everydayness" actually reflects a more fundamental ontology (*BT* 380–82). That is, Levinas demonstrates how all of our experiences, even the most "commonplace" (*TI* 53), are already bent eccentrically by our moral orientation towards the Other, already penetrated from the rear by obligation. For example, Levinas does not simply argue that "violence is bad," but rather demonstrates that, thanks to the ethical relationship, our wills and our bodies are always exposed to violence (*TI* 229) yet this violence is always postponed (*TI* 236).

Cohen equates Levinas's motif of height with a "moral force" that justifies hierarchical judgments of "better" and "worse" (*EEP* 140). Without properly articulating what the terms "good" and

"evil" mean in Levinas's writing, Cohen expresses this contrast with astonishing violence, arguing that Levinas's "battle cry would be'Against evil, for the good!'" (*EEP* 104) Such a polemical cry could not possibly come from Levinas, but rather from Nietzsche's man of *ressentiment.* According to Nietzsche, *ressentiment* arises from two inversions: (a) horizontally, *ressentiment,* the "sanctification of revenge under the name of justice" (52), looks outwards for an enemy rather than looking inwards for virtue; (b) vertically, *ressentiment* expresses the hatred of lowly people for the high born, and their jealous effort to revalue moral height. This attitude of *ressentiment* is most apparent in Cohen's description of Levinas as "teaching morality to the intellectual elite who think themselves too intelligent, too sophisticated, too cultured for ordinary morality" (*EEP* 1)

To avoid confusing Levinas's moral height with *ressentiment*, we must oppose the hierarchical logic of dogmatic orthodoxy by becoming subverters, overturning thought from below.[3] Judaism has always been a religion for subversion, for radical ruptures of thought that express both supreme disobedience and supreme piety. As Susan Handelman claims, Judaism contains within it a "heretic hermeneutic [that] can be part of tradition while simultaneously rebelling against it" (201). Our first patriarch, Abraham, became such an iconoclast when he smashed the idols revered and sold by his own father.[4] Similarly, modern Judaism stands in the shadow of Sabbatai Sevi, the 17th century apostate Messiah who consummated the Jewish Law by violating it.[5]

[3] FROM THE BOTTOM,

[4] Genesis Rabbah 38:14. A similar story is told about the same yet Islamic patriarch Ibrahim in the Qur'an 21:51–59

[5] Scholem 287–324. Sevi's antinomian acts were finally consummated when, threatened with execution by the Turkish Sultan, he converted to Islam.

most important ways that Otherness resists neutral universalization. However, as many critics have objected and as this paper has affirmed throughout, Levinas problematically employs patriarchal themes in his argument. We still who find value in Levinas's work must accept responsibility for this rhetoric, and must carefully consider creative ways to respond to the protests it has engendered.

Derrida suggest that perhaps one may try to read Levinas's texts as "a sort of feminist manifesto" (1999, 44). Precisely because Levinas so deliberately exposes patriarchy in his writing, feminist and queer interpreters can perhaps use his thought to critique patriarchy's legacy, to foster more gender openness, and to reconsider the gender and sexual dimensions of various ethical relationships as well as the ethical dimensions of various gender and sexual relationships.

In the end, however, this author of this paper you are right now reading can offer no final answer to these problems, but instead, as both a Levinas scholar and an anarcha-feminist, can only thank you for your time and welcome your responses.

References

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Knopf, 1968.

Bergo, Bettina. *Levinas between ethics and politics.* Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2003.

Bergson, Henri. *Creative evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell. New York: Random House, 1994.

Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble.* New York: Routledge, 1990.

Chanter, Tina. "Antigone's Dilemma." In *Re-reading Levinas,* ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.

Cohen, Richard A. *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* [*EHG*]. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994.

Hebrew term for face, פָּנִים, derives etymologically from the root ,פנה to turn. Thus, this same passage of Torah again reverts to a primordial turning. In this strange narrative, God first speaks "face-to-face" פָּנִים) (אֶל-פָּנִים with Moses, and then the "presence" ,פָּנַי) from the root (פנה goes with the Jewish people. After Moses asks not just to *speak* to the Lord but to actually *see* "Your Glory" ,כְּבֹדֶךָ) from the root ,כבד to burden or to respect) God replies that no one may see his face ,פָּנַי) from the root (פנה and live. Instead, God asks Moses to stand upon a rock. "And it shall come to pass, while My Glory ,כְּבֹדִי) from the root (כבד passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with My hand until I have passed by. And I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My backside ,אֲחֹרָי) from the root ,אחר to come after, to differ or defer); but My face (פָּנַי) shall not be seen." Although we do not necessarily agree with the Freudian interpretation of this verse as a proof of Jewish anal eroticism (Dundes 125), we must admire here how odd it is to have this Jewish patriarch, this first Messiah of the Jewish people, this leader of the exodus from slavery, to have Moses looking at the Glory through a cleft, a crack — we would dare say a "gloryhole" — gazing at the rear end of God.

Conclusion

When we try to get to the bottom of Levinas's views on gender, on the Cheek-to-Cheek relationship between the sexes, we are still left with an abyss, a gap *inter urinas et faeces*, between the manifold creativities of ejaculation, defecation, and parturition. For Levinas, this is the very hole that separates the masculine from the feminine, a difference that corresponds most apparently to heterosexual positions but that perhaps can be also perverted for homosexuality, lesbianism, transgender, and other forms of queer sexuality.

Gender and sexuality for Levinas constitute some of the most fundamental ways that difference is produced in experience, the

Immanent Metaphors

Alongside the violence of critical protest yet against the violence of rhetorical orthodoxy, we can still embrace the subversive potential of violent speech by interpreting Levinas blasphemously.[6] In contrast to Cohen's hierarchical and orthodox moralism, our subversive and radical reading will attempt to reveal the immanent roots, the poetic dimension within Levinas's hyperbolic, transcendental prose.[7] Such a reading will show that, although Levinas deliberately uses filial tropes throughout his work, this would only constitute a "problem" if it were read in a hermeneutically "straight" manner. Beneath the apparent hetero-normative veneer of Levinas's prose lurk traces of queerness. The ethical relationship is directed not simply from masculine Self to feminine Other, but is everywhere perverted.

One of the reasons why readings of Levinas have so consistently upheld a heteronormative analysis is that many interpretations construe his work through a set of programmatic proclamations. We often read that Levinas's philosophy can summarized as "Ethics is First Philosophy" or "The Other is the Most High." I would argue that, in addition to considering a statement like "ethics is first philosophy" to be a thematic declaration, we must meditate upon it as a riddle to be solved. In order to crack it open, we must think through not only the metaphysical traditions of *protē philosophia* in Aristotle and *prima philosophia* in Descartes, but more importantly, what the word "first" and what Derrida calls "the notion of primacy" (*WD* 97) mean in a Levinasian context.

[6] Indeed, Levinas implicates himself as such a blasphemer by daring to speak against the most infamous blasphemer in philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche (*OTB*, 177).

[7] Derrida writes, beautifully, "Levinas recommends the good usage of prose which breaks Dionysiac charm or violence, and forbids poetic rapture, but to no avail. In *Totality and Infinity,* the use of metaphor, remaining admirable and most often –if not always–beyond rhetorical abuse, shelters within its pathos the most decisive movements of the discourse" (*WD* 312 n7).

Rather than focusing on the obvious rhetorical gestures Levinas makes, a radical reading must look carefully at the immanent play of tropes within his work. Levinas's writing can only be understood through a close investigation of the interconnections and transformation between clusters of metaphors. Derrida slyly indicates this problem when he explains that "everything which Levinas designates as'formal logic' is contested in its root. This root would not only be the root of our language, but the root of all western philosophy" (*WD* 91).

Derrida's hint suggests that the easiest place to begin looking at Levinas's immanent wordplay would be in his etymological roots. For example, the Indo-European root "STA" has a long tradition in philosophy. Greek thought articulates it as "*hypoSTAsis,*" which is transformed into Latin as "*subSTAntia*." In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger considers this translation of philosophical terms to be one of the primordial stages in the forgetting of Being (*BW* 153). He redeploys this root using terms common to the German philosophical tradition such as "*VerSTAnd*" (understand), "*GegenSTAnd*" (represent) and "*VorSTEllung*" (notion), and he coins new terms such as "*GeSTEll*" (enframing) (*BW* 301). Almost parodying Heidegger, Levinas retranslates this German lexicon back into a Latin tongue, "romancing" the words back into a Romance language.[8] Not only does Levinas reclaim the term "hypostasis," he transmutes this root into terms such as "deSTItution," "subSTItution," and "inSTItution."

Derrida warns against the temptations of etymological thinking (*MP* 210), so I would not make the strong claim that Levinas puts his faith in the French language the same way Heidegger considers German to be the "House of Being" (*BW* 193). Whatever the ultimate ontological status of language, it seems clear that Levinas carefully picks each word in his texts with attention to its etymological and morphological resonances. In the 1940s, Levinas

[8] Thanks to Helen Douglas for this apt wordplay.

inversion in "Substitution," describing obsession as an "inversion of consciousness [that] is no doubt a passivity — but it is a passivity beneath all passivity" (*OTB* 101). This "inversion" can perhaps be understood as a rethematization of the Erotic "effemination;" in his seminal work, Havelock Ellis defined inversion as "sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality toward persons of the same sex" (1). The invocation of passivity can similarly remind us of Foucault's discussion of the Greek *polis*. According to Foucault, the Greeks juxtaposed "an ethos of male superiority" with "a conception of all sexual intercourse in terms of the schema of penetration and male domination." Thus, Athenian democracy was compelled to maintain the principles of political equality among male citizens while still recognizing one as the active, masculine sexual partner and the other as passive and "*feminized*" (220–22).

For Levinas, does not the ethical itself emerge as this very reconciliation of a dual Eros and a fraternal community? Levinas seems to highlight the Foucaultian problematic of homosociality, of sociality and homosexuality, by referring to the "will"– my virile self-assertion–as "the psyche backed up against itself," exposing its hindquarters. He draws attention to this issue by using the conspicuously obscure term "tergiversation" (*OTB* 112), turning us back to the same Latin root, *tergum* (back) + *verter* (turn).

The thematic of the backside seems to be a Levinasian reversal of the motif of the visage or face.[23] As many authors including Derrida (*WD* 108) and Cohen (*EHG* 244 n5) have commented, Levinas's reflections on this figure should return us back to the biblical description of the face-to-face in Exodus 33:11–23. Interestingly, the

[23] Isn't the face already two-sided? The English word "face" can translate two French, *visage* and *face*. Lingis translates *le visage* as "the face" of the transcendent Other (*TI* 25), and *la face* as "the side" (*TI* 131) of the immanent element. Following this logic, *le face-Ã -face* should perhaps not be translated as "the face to face," but rather as the opposite, "the side-to-side." The ethical encounter occurs only between two persons, two *persona*, two masks, two nobodies (*deux personnes*); I confront only a front of the Other.

Previous to this description of birthing, Levinas seems to describe metaphorically a process of fornication, in which I am situated as the recipient of the Other's thrusts. I am posited as an open orifice, an event of being which is the "folding back" (*OTB* 110) or the "hollowing out the fold of inwardness, in which knowledge is deposited, accumulated and is formulated" (*OTB* 28). Levinas explains that the for-itself is "not the germinal model" (*OTB* 106), but rather occurs in the accusative as my "pure surrender to the logos" (*OTB* 110) — the logos which is perhaps the *logos spermatikos*, the fertilizing power of reason. Similarly, Levinas explains my loss of sovereignty as an experience of being pricked from the rear. "Backed up against itself the self in its skin is both exposed to the exterior and obsessed by the others in this naked exposure" (*OTB* 112). In contrast, the Other seems to be getting an erection: whereas my soul is not "thickening and tumefying" (*OTB* 109), the Good is a "firmness more firm than firm" (112). Ultimately, the Other is experienced as an "entry inwards" (*OTB* 108); a diachrony that signifies "the one-penetrated-by the-other" (*OTB* 49).

Levinas's description is suggestive enough that this penetration may be interpreted in a heterosexual "biblical" manner, or in the "Greek" way so beloved by Plato's symposiasts. In many ways a homosexual interpretation seems more plausible. In *Totality and Infinity*, Eros can be read as heterosexual because it occurs between a masculine lover (*l'amant*) (*TI* 257, *TeI* 288) and a feminine Beloved (*l'Aimee*) (*TI* 256, *TeI* 286), who Levinas characterized as a "sister soul" that "self-presents as incest" (*TI* 254, translation modified). "Substitution," however, makes no mention of this feminine Beloved. Instead, she has been substituted by a past conditional subjunctive perfect "would have liked to pair up a sister soul [of] substitution and sacrifice" (*OTB* 126), a figure more reminiscent of Sophocles' *Antigone* than Aristophanes' fable.

Our interpretation will become even more blasphemous once we examine the radical turning that determines Levinas's orientation, sexual and otherwise, the root *verter*. Levinas uses the language of

displays this extraordinary attention to linguistic detail by noting that what Heidegger's "being-in-the-world," "being-for-death," and "being-with-Others" add to our philosophical knowledge "is that these prepositions –'in','for', and'with' are in the root of the verb'to be' (as'ex' is in the root of the verb'to exist')" (Wahl 50). Thus, we should assume that Levinas is always aware of roots, prefixes, and suffixes; of the nominal, verbal, prepositional, adjectival, and adverbial parts of speech; of the active, middle, and passive voices; of the nominative, vocative, dative, genitive, ablative, accusative and even locative cases.

In addition to these morphological considerations, we must attend to the semantic connections between various etymological networks. For example, words rooted in "STA" (e.g. stand), must be correlated with other etymological networks connoting position and proximity, as well as those connoting height and depth. The very word "origin" comes from *oriri,* to rise: for Levinas, man has "overcome" the "destitution" of his "animal needs" (*TI* 116–17) to become *homo erectus,* already erect and masterful and virile.

Genesis

Now that we have proposed an immanent hermeneutical strategy, we are bold enough to ask the broader interpretive question: what are Levinas's books about? What storyline runs through his work? When we pay close attention to the etymological and the semantic networks immanent to his sentences, we notice that the same motifs crop up again and again under new transformations.[9]

[9] Like many other philosophers, most notably Heidegger in *Being and Time*, Levinas writes in a prismatic manner. His language is packed so tightly with words that have been chosen so carefully and that reverberate against each other in such particular ways that, perhaps if we meditated upon and fully analyzed just one sentence, it would reveal the entire complexity of Levinas's thought. Conversely, almost Talmudically, we need entire sections from other essays and books to interpret the placement of each particular word in each particular sentence.

Derrida gives us an insight into how metaphors develop through Levinas's work: "*Totality and Infinity* proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself" (*WD* 312, n7). That is, Levinas's writing, both across the span of his works and within a single text, can be understood as a process of reiterative rewriting. Despite the fact that *Totality and Infinity* is broken up into a certain number of sections, chapters and subsections; and that *Otherwise than Being* was published 12 years after *Totality and Infinity*; and that Levinas's religious work must be distinguished from his philosophical writings, I would argue that Levinas discusses one and only one thing again and again: I confront you; or, put dialogically, I converse with the Other; you say some thing to me and I listen, and then I say some thing to you and you listen.

What animates Levinas's corpus is that each new analysis gives us a new perspective on this singular situation. I would in fact argue that the notion of "perspectivism" is as important for understanding Levinas's work as it is for Nietzsche's.[10] Although the dialogical relation of speech surmounts the theoretical stance of vision, Levinas still retains the notion of perspective, explaining that "ethics itself is an optics" (*TI* 23). He does not abandon visuality, but instead warps it, perverts it.[11] "The differences between the Other and me are due to the I-Other conjuncture, to the inevitable *orientation* of being'starting from oneself' towards'the Other.' The priority of this orientation over the terms that are placed in it (and

[10] Nietzsche writes, "There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective knowing."`http://www.waste.org/%7Eroadrunner/writing/ViewingPower/DescartesAnd` In many ways, Nietzsche's critique of a Kantian "eye turned in no particular direction" (119) anticipates Levinas's critique of Hegelian "panoramic" (*TI* 15) or "synoptic" (*TI* 53) thought.

[11] See my paper "Viewing Power" for an extended exploration of visual motifs in Descartes, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Levinas.

In a statement that can read heterosexually, homosexually, transsexually, or completely otherwise, Levinas explains, "The relation with the carnal and the tender precisely makes this self arise incessantly: the subject's trouble is not assumed by his mastery as a subject, but in his entenderment [*attendrissement*], his effemination, which the heroic and virile I will remember as one of those things that stand apart from'serious things'" (*TI* 270, *TeI* 303, translation modified).

Reading perversely, I would argue that the section "Substitution" in *Otherwise than Being* is Levinas's return, reversion, and reversal of *Totality and Infinity*'s analysis of Eros, a more developed account of the "effemination" of the "virile I." Levinas claims in this chapter that the approach of the neighbor is experienced as a "non-erotic proximity, a desire of the non-desirable, a desire of the stranger in the neighbor" (*OTB* 123). We should not let ourselves be misled by these negations: Levinas repeatedly distinguishes his philosophy from "formal logic," which would deduce a complete absence from a negative operation. Negation is never simple elimination but rather the enactment of a certain type of relationship. Derrida emphasizes the importance of these reversals: "It could doubtless be shown that it is in the nature of Levinas's writing, at its decisive moments, to move along these cracks, masterfully progressing by negations and by negation against negation" (*WD* 90).

When we ourselves explore these cracks, working backwards from the "non-erotic" moment, we can see how extraordinarily sexual "Substitution" is. The description "non-erotic" occurs in the sixth subsection of the chapter ("Finite Freedom"), in which Levinas contrasts "infantile spontaneity" with the created "subject come late into the world" (*OTB* 122). Previous to this, Levinas seems to be describing a process of maternal childbirth — not merely in his explicit reference to "maternity" (*OTB* 104), but also "the self as a creature is *conceived* in a passivity" (*OTB* 113, my italics), and "its recurrence is the *contracting* of an ego" (*OTB* 114, my italics).

ity has been reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies" (269). Ultimately, for Levinas, no matter the biological or ontological gender, both the Self and the Other always embody both feminine and masculine traits in a state of metaphysical ambisexuality.

Tergum Verter

(*do not penetrate me, oh my angel*)

A perverter of philosophy, Emmanuel Levinas continuously corrupts ontological relationships, demonstrating how ethical ambiguity prevents the copula, the third-person "is" of a neutral Being, from reducing the essential Saying to a nominal Said (*OTB* 41–4). According to him, the being of the Self is not a straightforward self-relation but rather a "fundamental inversion, not of just some function of being, a function turned from his end, but an inversion in his very exercise of being" (*TI* 63, translation modified). The Self does not relate to itself through a reflection of selfhood, but rather through the Other, both through an actual human Other and also through the Other that the Self was in the past and the Other that it will be in the future. Magnetized by the displacement that separates the Self from the Other, the ethical relationship perverts Being from any simple, straight union. Just as Freud describes perversion as a deviation of the normal sexual aim, "the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation" (15), Levinas explains how the "return to oneself" (*TI* 266) of copulation is perverted in the "Phenomenology of Eros" (*TI* 256–266).

Levinas's description of the very site of the dual relationship, Eros, is profoundly ambiguous. It is often unclear how to distinguish the Lover from the Beloved and the I from the Other; to figure out who is who and who is doing what to whom; to understand which is feminine and which masculine. Even more explicitly than the case of welcoming home, Eros affects a gender transformation.

which cannot arise without this orientation) summarizes the theses of the present work" (*TI* 215).[12]

Once we understand the way that Levinas's perspectives bend, we can begin to reflect upon the metaphorical networks that illuminate his work. Most frequently, Levinas indicates the doublesidedness of a phenomenological event by reversing a perspective. For example, to claim only that the Other is situated in an elevated state as the "Most High" is to miss the full dynamic mobilization of this metaphor. The "height" of the other is the hyperbolic correlate and the perspectival reversal of the "the upsurge of the self (*le surgisment de soi*) One becomes a subject of being [by] an exaltation, an'above being'" (*TI* 119, *TeI* 123). Keeping in mind that the French root "*sur*" means "over," we can then understand why Levinas insists that we experience history as a "SURvivor" (*TI* 57), why infinity "SURpasses itself" (*TI* 103), and why fecund temporality is a "reSURrection" (*TI* 56). Through a different perspectival reversal, this height of separation can also be expressed as "an abyss within enjoyment itself" (*TI* 141), which becomes articulated as my "hypostasis" (*TO* 54–55) and the Other's "destitution" (*TI* 78).

Now that we have a preliminary understanding of Levinas's particular usage of tropes, we can better investigate why he seems so

[12] Levinas develops his viewpoint on perspective through the motif of "the curvature of intersubjective space [that] inflects distance into elevation" (*TI* 291). This curvature occurs through a distortion of length and height, a warping of vertical and horizontal dimensions, and a perversion of lateral and hierarchical relationships. Levinas's notion of "height" has inspired Cohen to discuss his hierarchical "elevations" and Bettina Bergo to look at his stratified "levels of being" (Bergo 55–81). In addition, Levinas also describes the singular ethical confrontation as various angularities. I would suggest that the "schema of being" in *Totality and Infinity* does not, as Bergo states, "resemble the figure of two parabolas intersecting at their bases" (59). Instead, his self-described "hyperbolic" (*OTB* 49) phenomenology resembles a hyperbola, the eccentric set of points defined by the difference between two separated points. Perhaps each of his analyses could be considered as describing the tangency of infinitely unapproachable asymptotes? Could this perhaps be compared to Lucretius and Deleuze's "clinamen," the infinitesimal deviation from a straight path?

attached to what Derrida calls "the family schema" (*PF* viii). Already a doubling reversal is expressed through this trope: the "familiar" already hyperbolically inverts the Other's existence as an alien, as "not resting on any prior kinship" (*TI* 34). For Levinas, the notion of "family" connotes the way an individuated, separated multiplicity of entities are already related to each other, through social temporalities and moral obligations that preexist the political order. Contrasting his analysis with a philosophical tradition stretching from Plato to Hegel, he asserts "the family does not only result from a rational arrangement of animality; it does not simply mark a step towards the anonymous universality of the State. It identifies itself outside of the State, even if the State reserves a framework for it" (*TI* 306).

Filiality does not emerge simply as a social construction, but rather constitutes a responsibility for other human beings independently of unifying structures such as Hegelian Spirit or Heideggerean Being. Writing from within the phenomenological tradition, Levinas most pointedly questions the reductive universalization of Husserl's *genus* (*TI* 194–96), a term derived from the Indo-European GEN, signifying "birth."[13] For Levinas, the generative family demonstrates that, rather than merely issuing from an origin, existence is a continuous creation: "the discontinuity of Cartesian time, which requires a continuous creation, indicates the very dispersion and plurality of created being" (*TI* 58).[14]

[13] Husserl himself seems to recognize the flexibility of this root by associating essential "genus" and "genera" with logical "generality" (*Ideas* 24–25), as well as "genetic" and "generative" phenomenology (*Analyses* 628). Even more deliberately, Bergson argues that that a vital genesis ultimately generates the neutral generality of *a priori* Kantian laws (245–46).

[14] In addition, this idea of continuous creation can be found in the Jewish religion, both in the Talmud and in the morning blessing for the Lord who "renews every day the work of creation." Levinas also finds the idea in the Greek philosophy of Heraclitus and Cratylus who describe a "becoming radically opposed to the idea of being the resistance to every integration destructive of Parmedian monism" (*TI* 59–60). The difference is often described as a distinction between

almost-Bergsonian notion of "animal need liberated from vegetable dependence."[21]

This explication does not necessarily blunt the feminist critique of his thought, but it complicates the issue considerably. Simone De Beauvoir is precisely correct: Levinas *does* "privilege" the masculine. For him, tropes signifying one-ness and first-ness refer to the masculine, and tropes signifying duality and two-ness refer to the feminine. However, it is unclear whether we should necessarily reach from these facts the conservative conclusion that primacy is "better" than secondariness or that masculinity is "better" than femininity.

In *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler takes this problem of gender even further by questioning the very binary division of sexuality. "Power appeared to operate in the production of that very binary frame for thinking about gender that binary relation between'men' and'women'" (xxviii). Those attempting to overcome binary gender divisions will find that, in many ways, gender is the binarism of binarisms for Levinas, that it could perhaps be considered the paradigm for all other binarisms. I would argue, however, that sexuality is already so overdetermined for Levinas that it already anticipates or includes within it the movements of deconstruction and dialectic, and thus a deconstructive or dialectical critique must proceed carefully.[22]

Levinas explains repeatedly that the dualism of gender is related to but not reducible to the biological division between the sexes. Thus, we could perhaps use his thought to open up the categories of "masculinity" and "femininity" for various biological genders; to oppose, along with Judith "Jack" Halberstam, the fact that "masculin-

[21] Compare Bergson 105–35. Throughout *Totality and Infinity,* Levinas takes pains to distinguish humanity from mere animality. In *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas extends these tropes by employing the motif of "animation" (*OTB* 69) while analyzing spirit (*anima* in Greek).

[22] To my knowledge, Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida have done the best work confronting this problem.

Even more than his linking of womanhood with domesticity, Levinas's description of the erotic feminine Beloved in "The Phenomenology of Eros" has incurred condemnation from feminist critics for its usage of stereotypical motifs. It is easiest to conceptualize this section if we remember that the French slang for orgasm is "*la petite mort,*" the little death. When we read *Totality and Infinity*'s central narrative as being about continuous creation and recreation, we see that the story has brought the subject from childhood enjoyment (147–51), to matrimony (154–56), to adult labor and mastery (158–62), and then to an awareness of temporal mortality (226–36). After this, the storyline of the "Phenomenology of Eros" transits through the arc of death and rebirth, from "dying without murder" (258), to sexual "voluptuosity as a pure experience" (260), to the womblike "community of sentient and sensed" (265), and then to the "engendering of the child" (266). Within this narrative, Levinas employs several characterizations of the feminine Beloved (*aimee*) that have given rise to considerable controversy, especially his description of "the beloved return[ing] to the stage of infancy … [like] a young animal" (*TI* 263, see Walsh 80–82 for a critique). In response, one should first point out that the motifs Levinas employs in this section also relate to the wider metaphorical networks that constitute his thought: the "frailty" of the Beloved relates to the dynamics of "destitution;" her "foreignness to the world" relates to the "alterity" of the Other; her secrecy and profanation, hiddenness and monstrousness relate to the question of expression and appearance; her "nudity" relates to the tropes of embodiment and exposure; her "ultramateriality" relates to "matter" and the "body;" her "virginity" and "violability" relate to the problematics of "violence" and "murder." As mentioned above, the motif of "infancy" partakes in the network of terms connoting birth, which Levinas describes in the phenomenology of separated enjoyment. In this section, Levinas also introduces an

There is a sense in which *Totality and Infinity* may be read as if were the first Book of Moses, Genesis or ,בְּרֵאשִׁית[15] the story of the engendering of generations. It tells a story of life stage development, from birth through mature home ownership, through old age, through sex and death, to rebirth. Levinas employs the terminology of birth repeatedly to describe a variety of interconnected phenomenological events such as the "latent birth" of the subject (*OTB* 139), the "birth of love" in Eros (*TI* 277), and the "birth of thought, consciousness, justice, and philosophy of a meaning" through the third party (*OTB* 128).

In the life-stage narrative of *Totality and Infinity*, the event of birth is explored through the opening section on enjoyment, "the very production of a being that is born, that breaks the tranquil eternity of its seminal or uterine existence to enclose itself in a person" (*TI* 147).[16] The motifs Levinas employs in this original section are connected to other metaphorical networks throughout his work. In addition to being a member of the biblical triad of destitution along with the stranger and the widow (*TI* 77), the "orphan" describes a particular aspect of this production of being, "an orphan by birth" (*OTB* 105). This orphan event occurs because the child is born separated, after the erotic death of the mother and the father, "having absolved oneself from relations" (*TI* 195), separated from all relatives, constantly menaced by neediness. One reversal of this concept–this conception–of the orphan is the concept of the work,

Parmenidean ἐὸν, Being / *Sein / etre* and Heraclitean γενέσις, which is generally translated either as genesis / *Genese* / *genÃ¨se* or becoming / *Werden* / *devenir*. The divergence and convergence of these two sets of translations again announces intriguing proximities between Levinas and Deleuze.

[15] Perhaps we can consider *Otherwise than Being* as ,לֶךְ-לְךָ the story of Abraham's departure?

[16] Lingis takes care to translate the infant's practically "oceanic" relationship to the element, *"nourriture,*" into English as "nourishment," thus drawing attention etymologically to the way that maternal "materiality" (133) of the infinitive *nourrice,* to nurse, becomes "substantial" (133) and nominal in the infant.

which Levinas describes as "always in a certain sense an *abortive* action" (*TI* 228, my italics), a doubling of birth and death.

As mentioned above, this continuous GENesis must be understood as a creative enGENdering, and thus gender informs all phenomenological matters. As with the family, gender is essential for overcoming a unifying totality. Levinas asserts, "The difference between the sexes is a formal structure, but one that carves up reality in another sense and conditions the very possibility of reality as multiple, against the unity of being proclaimed by Parmenides" (*TO* 44). For Levinas, gender is essential for breaking with "the neuter (the sole gender formal logic knows)" (*TI* 256), and with the neutral, Heideggerean Being that Blanchot criticizes (*TI* 298). Unlike German and English which do have neuter cases, the French language gives all proper nouns a masculine or feminine gender. For example, "*le sujet*" is masculine in French, just as human subjectivity and political citizenship have traditionally been figured as masculine by male philosophers.

Seconds

Now that we have begun to understand what the theme of gender signifies for Levinas, we can begin to consider the meaning of the Feminine. Perversely, I am going to attempt to give this Feminine a proper name, a biblical name. It is not one of the feminine names Levinas gives in "Judaism and the Feminine" such as Miriam or Tamar or Leah (*DF* 31), but it is perhaps the most frequently used name in the bible. Before I produce this woman before you, let me begin by suggesting that, in his early work, Levinas states that "all philosophy is perhaps a meditation on Shakespeare" (*TO* 72). In contrast to the tragic Greek heroes who confront death as part of their fate and destiny in a Heideggerean Being-towards-Death, Levinas discusses man's confrontation with death through the character of Macbeth. Macbeth not only wishes that the world would die

and recursion, this doubling is produced even in the relationship between the ego and the self, the *moi* and the *soi* (*TO* 56), the nominative "I" and the accusative "me" (*OTB* 112).

Ambisexuality

Now that we have a better understanding of the binary character of gender and the importance of duality throughout Levinas's work, we can begin to think more carefully about the problem of the "Feminine" in Levinas. Not only does Levinas explicitly discuss the feminine and masculine aspects of the Other, a careful reading of his texts indicates that these structures of masculinity and femininity are also present within the Self. This is most evident in his description of the Home, whose condition is the Woman.[20] The principal role of the feminine dwelling is to provide the site for reversion, the base of welcoming (*accueil*) for recollection (*recueillement*) (*TI* 155; *TeI 165*), of acceptance for receptivity. Levinas describes this phenomenological production, saying "this refers us to its essential interiority, and to the inhabitant that inhabits it before every inhabitant, the welcoming *par excellence,* welcome in itself — the feminine being" (*TI* 157). If Levinas here characterizes feminine alterity by the "welcome" it offers, then we can only conclude that *I* am figured as a woman only a few pages later. "I welcome the Other who presents *himself* in my home by opening my home to *him*" (*TI* 171, my italics). In fact, my identification as a welcoming woman is the very basis of Levinasian ethics: "metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge" (*TI* 43).

[20] Because the woman makes the world "familiar" (*TI* 154–56), she is the key to *all* of Levinas's family tropes.

Just as there is a certain masculinity associated with the single, femininity is typically manifested as double. Levinas most explicitly refers to the duality of gender in his Judaic writings. "Did not God give the name'Adam' to man and woman joined together as if the two were one, as if the unity of the person were able to triumph over the dangers lying in wait for it only by virtue of a duality inscribed in its essence" (*DF* 33). Levinas distinguishes yet relates this biblical story of gender division from the tale of sexual mitosis and nostalgia that Aristophanes recounts in the *Symposium*, which he instead uses to illustrate the "incestuous" character of Eros (*TI* 254). Beyond this, 2, by being the first plural after the singular 1, first opens up plurality as such. Thus, Levinas asserts that the vital impulse "presupposes the intervals of sexuality and a specific dualism in its articulation. Sexuality is in us neither knowledge nor power, but the very plurality of our existence" (*TI* 276).

This theme of doubleness applies not only to gender but to absolutely every movement in Levinas's thought–the very notion of alterity implies secondariness.[18] Levinas's entire analysis is built upon changes in direction, so duality enters any time he uses the Latin root *verter*, to turn,[19] in terms such as "reversion" and "inversion." This structure of doubling is already within all terms prefixed by "equi," "ambi," "amphi," or "dia," such as "equivocation," "ambiguity," "amphibology," "ambiguity," and "diachrony." The double indicates the dynamic tension of the "non-assemblable duality" (*OTB* 69), and of the diachronic interval "between two times" (*TI* 58). Doubleness articulates the orientation between every trope, such as the relation between masculine Height and its hyperbolic correlate, feminine Depth. This dynamic reversal occurs not just between the genders in sexuality, but also as the homosocial "man to man," the ethical "face to face" (*TI* 79–81). Through enjoyment

[18] In his discussion of Husserl, Anthony Steinbock explains, "As the expression of an ordinal number, both terms *ander* and *autre* used to mean and can still mean'*second*'" (58).

[19] Perhaps related to Heidegger's *Kehre*?

along with him, "he wishes that the nothingness of death be a void as total as that which would have reigned had the world *never been created*" (*TI* 231, my italics). Two important things must be said about this dramatic person who opposes origination. First of all, he is warned by the witches–the Moirae, the Fates–that his death will come at the hands of an Other who is "not of woman born," his friend MacDuff. Second, in order to understand who Macbeth himself is, we must understand that "Mac" is a common Gaelic prefix for "son of." "MacBeth" is quite an unusual name because generally these names are patronymic, such as "Johnson" for the son of John or "MacDonald" for the son of Donald, but in this case it would appear that this familiar character is the son of a woman named "Beth."

There are multiple reasons why it is useful to express the Feminine as being named "Beth." In Hebrew, "Beth" signifies not only a proper name, but also the second letter of the alphabet, ב. It can function as a locative prefix indicating "inside," perhaps even "interiority." Although ב is the second letter of the alphabet, it is the first letter of creation, the first letter in the first word of the first parshah of the first book of Torah: בְּ,רֵאשִׁית "In the beginning." Already in this very word, the root which–ראש can be translated as "head" or "first" or even "ἀρχή"– is preceded by the secondary letter ב. "Beth" in Hebrew signifies not only the letter ,ב but also the word ,בַּיִת which translates as "house," even as "dwelling." For this reason, "Beth" is the most frequently used feminine name in the Bible, as a locative signifier in place names such as "Bethel" and "Beth Israel." Again, the first word of Torah, בְּ רֵאשׁ**ית**, houses the primary ראש within the בַּיִת.

In addition to these various linguistic meanings, ב also has a mathematical signification: Because Hebrew uses letters to represent numbers, ב also signifies the number 2. One of the motifs that most pervasively underlies the Levinas's work is the question of number. Like many philosophers before him, Levinas confronts a perennial mathematical problem: when we think of a certain quan-

tity of things, we generally conceive of a singularity rather than a multiplicity. That is, when we contemplate "twenty dogs," we typically consider this as a single group of twenty rather than thinking the twenty-ness of the twenty itself. Levinas expresses this problem through meditations on plurality and multiplicity "The plural is given to a number. Unity alone is ontologically privileged. Multiple is, but in synthesis is no more" (*TI* 274).

At the risk of implicating Emmanuel Levinas in paganism or kabbalah, let me state that there is something almost Pythagorean in his thought, in the sense that numbers are not used merely for counting, but themselves describe certain configurations of Being. A thorough investigation will require additional study, but we can begin to account for his numbers here.

Levinas thinks the "negative" in tension with the skeptical negations of Descartes (*TI* 92–93), the dialectical negation of Hegel's *Aufhebung* (*TI* 305), and the negation of *Dasein*'s death (*TI* 56). He invokes the terrible quality of the negative as the *il y a*, that which exists after the negation of all particular, positive entities (*TI* 190, cf. *EE* 57–64). On the other hand, I establish my own positive, separated selfhood by negating alterity through labor and integrating it back into the Same (*TI* 40–41). Against this murderous violence that "proceeds from unlimited negation" (*TI* 225), the Other can "sovereignly say no" (*TI* 199). Negation occurs not only in this masculine confrontation, but also through the feminine "less than nothing" (*TI* 258) encountered in Eros which has "reference –be it negative–to the social" (*TI* 262).

Closely related to but distinct from the negative is the zero. Before the positive singularity of selfhood, zero occurs as anarchy (*OTB* 99), the zero point (*TI* 159), the null site (*OTB* 10), creation *ex nihilo* (*TI* 104), freedom originally null (*TI* 224). More generally, zero describes a boundary surrounding positive existence as the elemental menace of nowhere (*TI* 141), the void of illumination (*TI* 189), the nothingness of the future (*TI* 146), and the "no man's land."[17] Relationships through the zero occur as the erotic caress "seizing upon nothing" (*TI* 257), the ethical "exteriority coming from nothingness" (*TI* 293), substituting oneself in a "null place" (*OTB* 116), and fraternity as "a complicity for nothing" (*OTB* 150).

Now that we have begun to work through the negative and the zero, we can think through the positive, in which we can already hear spatial "position," cognitive "positing," and philosophical "positivism." The social and political are produced as a "multiplicity" or "plurality" (*TI* 220–2), which is related to but distinct from the "third party" who calls for justice (*TI* 157). Alterity itself can be considered as the greatest positive of all, "infinity" (*TI* 41).

Arithmetical transformations can be illustrated most clearly through the number one. One is invoked as zero, as the neutralizing, nullifying singularities of the "unity of the system" (*TI* 150) and "universalization" (*TI* 247). One occurs as singular masculine subjectivity in the "solitude" of "man" (*TI* 119), as well as in the "happiness [that] comes for the first time" (*TI* 114), and the apologetic "speech in the first person" (*TI* 242). Doubling into one occurs in the "dual solitude" (*TI* 265) of Eros. Dialogically, it manifests in the ethical relation to the Other because the neighbor is "the first one on the scene" (*OTB* 11), whose "first teaching" of ethical height (*TI* 171) expresses "the first word'you shall not commit murder'" (*TI* 199). Because the Other is "from the first the brother of all men" (*OTB* 158), a "community" (*TI* 214) can arise in which "the unity of plurality is peace" (*TI* 306).

It is necessary to meditate on this entire network encompassed by the motif of "one" before evaluating Levinas's assertion that morality is "first philosophy" (*TI* 304) or to address the problem that he "privileges" masculinity.

[17] Historically, this phrase was used during the First World War to refer to the neutral or the disputed territory between battle lines. Metaphorically, it connotes negativity and femininity, as well as placement, territoriality, nationalism, and utopia.